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Dissonance, distortion and *détournement*: reinterpreting "The Star-Spangled Banner"

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In the spring of 2011, a wave of panic spread through the Irish media as the copyright on the national anthem approached its expiration date.[1] "Save our Soldiers' Song" (Falkiner), "Fears Expressed as Copyright Expires" (Dervan), "National Anthem 'Under Threat' as Copyright Expires" (Gibney) read the headlines. The anxiety was such that many suggested choosing a new anthem rather than exposing "The Soldiers' Song" to potential abuse (Cullen; Hegarty). Once it falls into the public domain, the national anthem will be open to commercial exploitation and artistic interpretations – usages that many a patriot considers blasphemous and equates to flag desecration. Evoking one of the worst-case scenarios, opposition member of parliament Maureen O'Sullivan expressed concerns about a future rap version of anthem (@JOEdotie) – which might either illustrate hip hop's enduring social stigma or the increased visibility of Irish rap as a political force to reckon with in times of economic recession (McLoskey, Coulter).

On the Ireland IP & Technology Law Blog, a website dedicated to intellectual property issues, John Cahir explained that the fear associated to the loss of control over national anthems was "a problem long experienced by other countries," citing the examples of Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock in 1969 and the Sex Pistols' version of 'God Save the Queen' in 1977 (Cahir). On another website, a specialist of commercial litigation reminded readers that Australia, faced with a similar situation, had changed its own legislation to create a special trade mark protection for national icons. The move came after Meat and Livestock Australia rewrote the words of the Australian anthem ('Advance Australia Fair') in a 2002 advertisement entitled 'Lamb's Australia Fare' (Colleary; Condon).

♦ Elsa Grassy, *SEARCH, Université de Strasbourg.*

1 The Irish Ministry of Finance held the copyright on the English lyrics of the anthem, written in 1907, until December 2012; yet it has never acquired rights on the 1923 Irish version, 'Amhrán na bhFiann.'

Yet although national anthems do undergo a certain degradation when their copyrights expire – no longer exclusively the musical equivalent of nations, they must accept their nature as music *material* available for public use – lay versions can remain acceptable aural supports for the expression of patriotism, however different from their original versions. At the same time Irish politicians were worrying over the fate of their anthem, *Moneyball*, a baseball movie starring Brad Pitt, was offering a rather reassuring vision of what happens to musical icons when they fall into public use. As a fictionalized account of the Oakland Athletics' rise to success during the 2002 season, the movie features a reenactment of a game played by the team in San Francisco. For the scene, guitarist Joe Satriani was asked to play the version of the American national anthem he had performed at the original game. His performance, heavily laden with distortion, is much bolder than what is customary – even from respected artists, who might enjoy more leniency from the audience than lesser-known performers.[2] But this does not seem to impact the original meaning of the tune: the audience is shown as listening respectfully, hand on their hearts, and the twisted sounds seem to be a mere point of artistic license. Yet, thirty years before, a similar version of "The Star-Spangled Banner", performed by Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, had shocked conservative commentators – which explains why the piece made it to Cahir's list of notorious covers. Hendrix's use of distortion was then understood as a political statement – not only because the dissonant sounds suggested political disharmony or a widening gap between American ideals (the original score) and American political practice (their actual performance by the Johnson administration) but because the wailings of his guitar were meant to sound like falling bombs at a time when America was engaged in Vietnam.

Focusing on "The Star-Spangled Banner," this article examines how popular music interpretations of national anthems constitute a distinct case of musical cover. The specificities of those performances result from the originals' status as national symbols, which also determines the way the public and the media interpret each deviation from the standard version as potentially conveying political criticism. At the heart of the matter lies the issue of musical meaning and assumptions about music as a means of social and political commentary.

The status of national anthems

National anthems are special among songs because of their iconic nature. The musical equivalent of flags, they are not only about a country – they stand for it. Consequently, just as there is a proper way to behave in the presence of the flag of the United States and to dispose of it, there is a proper way to behave whenever the

2 Whitney Houston, for example, merely added melisma to the anthem when she sang it at the 1991 Superbowl.

national anthem is played. Section 36 of the US Code, § 301, establishes that when the flag is displayed,

> individuals in uniform should give the military salute at the first note of the anthem and maintain that position until the last note; members of the Armed Forces and veterans who are present but not in uniform may render the military salute in the manner provided for individuals in uniform; and all other persons present should face the flag and stand at attention with their right hand over the heart, and men not in uniform, if applicable, should remove their headdress with their right hand and hold it at the left shoulder, the hand being over the heart.

If the flag is not displayed,

> all present should face toward the music and act in the same manner they would if the flag were displayed.

Yet disrespecting that part of the US Code will not result in sanctions, as there have been so far no penalties attached to disrespecting the national flag. Judging from the Supreme Court's 1989 and 1990 rulings on flag desecration, it is also very unlikely that anthem desecration will become unconstitutional in the near future. In *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989) the Court established that the First Amendment prohibited all attempts to ban flag desecration, which registered as "symbolic speech." One year later, *United States v. Eichman* (496 U.S. 310) invalidated a federal law against flag desecration on the same grounds.[3] It is also quite revealing that the only USSC ruling to have cited a cover of the national anthem settled a copyrights dispute in favor of freedom of speech. In October 2011, the Supreme Court examined an argument over whether Congress had acted constitutionally in 1994 by restoring copyright protection to foreign works that once had been in the public domain. In the course of the argument, John Roberts, the chief Justice, reframed the question to explain what repercussions reestablishing copyrights might have, wondering aloud, "What about Jimi Hendrix, right? He has a distinctive rendition of the national anthem, and assuming the national anthem is suddenly entitled to copyright protection that it wasn't before, he can't do that, right?" (Liptak).

Obviously, Roberts did not consider Hendrix's reworking of the anthem as sacrilegious – on the contrary, he seemed to suggest that a copyright on "The Star-

3 After the *Johnson* and *Eichman* decisions, several flag burning amendments to the Constitution were proposed – all to no avail. The House passed a *Flag Desecration Amendment* on June 21, 2005 with the needed two-thirds majority (H.RES.330), but the Senate rejected it on June 27, 2006 (S.J.RES.12) in a close vote of 65 in favor, 34 opposed – one vote short of the two-thirds majority needed to send the amendment to be voted on by the states.

Spangled Banner" might have been a liability, to the extent that it would have prevented the guitarist from adding to American culture. His comment is based on a view of the national anthem not as the iconic representation of the United States – whose integrity should be protected – but as music. From this point of view, as one of the richest types of music material, the anthem should be available to artists for reinterpretation.

But if the law protects the right to use national symbols to express personal opinions, public opinion diverges from the courts': when the Justices ruled in *Texas v. Johnson*, they invalidated laws in force in 48 of the 50 states, and several polls have suggested since then that a majority of Americans would support a ban on flag-burning (Taylor). This might explain why although there are in theory no registered cases of official anthem misuse and no official version of the song, several interpretations have shocked the public for their apparent mishandling of a national symbol.[4]

Deviant versions

In the case of patriotic hymns, any deviation from the original version can be considered disrespectful; just as a non-intentional botched interpretation, however orthodox, can distract the listener,[5] variation itself constitutes an attack on the integrity of the song. The original becomes the musical equivalent of raw material – the melody is broken down into notes and the beat into rhythmic patterns, which diverts the listener's attention from the global meaning of the piece. Divorced from its function as a trigger for patriotic feelings and the activation of collective memory, the anthem necessarily undergoes desecration. Yet it seems that the public's reaction depends on three main factors: the novelty of the musical idiom in which the anthem is interpreted, the main musical category it belongs to (classical or popular), and the political context in which it is performed as well as the author's stated intention.

4 In an issue of the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, William Lichtenwanger argued in favor of establishing an official version of the anthem. The set format (a tempo of 98 to 106 quarter notes per minute that would allow for the performers to slow down as they reach the end, six beats to the measure, and the key of G) would spare the audience unfelicitous versions stemming from the belief that "every performance of the national anthem has to be personalized, intolerably drawn out, crooned, put over like a pop song and otherwise deformed by all manner of vocal and musical convolutions" (1977, quoted in Henahan). He also suggested that the anthem be played only for "truly important ceremonial occasions – inaugurations rather than baseball matches" (Lichtenwanger 1978, 69).

5 Henahan goes as far as to suggest that unprofessional performances of the song should be booed, as Stravinsky's was in Baltimore, in 1941 – an event which, to him, represented, in wartime, "one of Baltimore's finest patriotic and musical moments."

Sound

It is clear that the American audience's understanding of what constitutes an orthodox version of their national anthem has evolved, as previously unacceptable musical stylings have now become commonplace in public interpretations. The first time a personalized version of the anthem was broadcast on national television, America responded with outrage. At the beginning of game five in the 1968 World Series, José Feliciano, a Puerto Rican singer, chose a "soul-rock" interpretation of the anthem over the customary march; he was immediately booed by the crowd (Rockwell 2004). While a contemporary American audience wouldn't flinch to the version today – as proven by Alexandra T. Vazquez in a classroom experiment (Vazquez 35-36) – radio and television networks were flooded with calls during the broadcast. "It was a disgrace, an insult," said a young woman in the audience, "I'm going to write to my Senator about it" (Associated Press).

Yet after the initial shock, the American public grew to appreciate Feliciano's fresh take on the anthem. RCA issued the version as a single a few months only after the game and, as reported by WNEW disc-jockey Williams B. Williams, if a few radio listeners still resented it, many others praised it for its originality ("Anthem, Sung by Feliciano, Is Issued by RCA Records"). Further proof that the audience's tolerance for novelty had evolved, only five years later, at the request of Spiro Agnew, Ethel Ennis received wide praise for her performance of an *a cappella* jazz-spiritual version of the anthem during Nixon's second inauguration; what was shocking at a baseball game in 1968 had become perfectly acceptable on the very steps of the Capitol by 1973.[6] While a *New York Times* reporter did note that her singing "provided a contemporary note that contrasted with Mr. Nixon's emphasis on the verities of the past" (Apple 40), the newspaper confirmed that "the reaction to her interpretation […] was so strong and so immediate that the singer [had] been catapulted into a flurry of television and radio appearances […] and offers from nightclubs" (Wilson).

Another reason why Ennis's version was perceived as milder than Feliciano's might have been that, between the two performances, a more jarring and politically charged interpretation had given the audience more perspective on what constituted a musical attack on American institutions. The musical watershed happened when the most memorable interpretation of "The Star-Spangled Banner" of that period – probably of all time – was that played by Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, in the evening of August 15, 1969, its third and last day.[7] *Woodstock*'s director Michael Wadleigh

6 Similarly, Marvin Gaye received a tremendous ovation after a few scattered boos when he performed the anthem at the 1983 NBA All Star Game, using a drum machine and synthesizer. Listening to the recording, one can hear the crowd cheer and applaud after practically every verse ("Marvin Gaye's 'National Anthem'").

7 Hendrix's performance appears both on the Woodstock album and in the film of the same name. It has also been issued on compact disc.

remembers "people literally tearing their hair out" and "people grabbing their heads, so ecstatic, so stunned and moved, a lot of people holding their breath, including [him]" (Ventre). But it is actually hard to gauge the general public's reaction to Hendrix's version – or, let's be clear, even whether there *was* or ever has been a national reaction to it. The attendees, and most of the viewers of the documentary and of the listeners of the album have been a select group. In addition to the festival not being televised, Hendrix's performance received little media attention – the festival itself was enough to comment on. Most of what has been stated about the anthem and its significance came long after the fact, each reaction building on the praise or rejection found in earlier accounts, and actually says more about its author's involvement in the debate on the counterculture, popular music, and the 1960s than about what the average American would have felt listening to the distorted anthem. But the version's being quoted as an example of what Irish people should fear for their own anthem attests to the fact that forty years of second-hand comments have made it the focus of an international debate on what constitutes musical defiling for a national symbol.

As noted by Eric F. Clarke, Hendrix's version preserved the identity of the anthem: its basic rhythmic outline and its melody are both recognizable. What made it startling was that the guitarist played it on an amplified electric guitar, at a rock festival, adding distinctly rock effects to his sound (feedback and distortion mainly). Thus, like Feliciano and Ennis, he performed the anthem in a non-customary, popular music idiom – and one that, by the end of the 1960s, had come to carry subversive overtones. As Claude Chastagner explains in *De la Culture Rock*, the very sound of rock symbolized rebellion and disobedience by then:

> Rock's amplified and distorted sound is one of the ingredients on which its reputation as a violent, uncontrollable and anti-establishment music is based – one of its emblems, even. It comes from the electric guitar, one of the few instruments that can toy with noise, feedback and Larsen effects, and give out fuzzy sounds and pink or white noise when played at full volume, to the point that melodic, harmonic and even rhythmic patterns become irrelevant – a staple of the most violent subgenres of rock. Under the rule of noise, whatever was regulated, ordered and structured in the music becomes arbitrary, unruly, and deconstructed. And so rock completed a semantic transfer: as it freed itself from acoustic constraints and from the musical order, it became a metaphor for emancipation. The Larsen effect suddenly carried a call for independence.[8] (Chastagner 108)

8 "Le son électrique amplifié et distordu est un des ingrédients, un des emblèmes de la réputation violente, incontrôlable et contestataire de la musique rock. La guitare électrique en est l'origine. Elle est un des rares instruments à pouvoir jouer avec le bruit, le feedback,

Among all of the sound effects mentioned by Chastagner, distortion[9] was certainly the most provoking choice for an interpretation of the anthem – as if rock's role as a metaphor for countercultural values did not suffice. Historically, distortion has been regarded as noise – it was an undesirable sound which audio engineers aiming for perfect audio fidelity labored to eliminate.[10] In the 1950s, it changed status when rock guitarists started using overtones and deliberately adding electronic distortion to make their sound fuzzier and thicker as part of a new guitar esthetic (Walser 42). As wonderful as a richer harmonic complexity may seem, the word *distortion* itself still suggests conflict and discord since it refers to a problematic change made to an original. The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines it as either a deformation that can go to the point of disfiguration, or a biased alteration, as of a speech, which changes its meaning so much as to create a wrong impression – possibly with an intention to deceive.

While the distorted original is initially the sound itself (and can indeed, as in rock, become a metaphor for freedom from convention), in the case of a cover, the musical tampering takes on new meaning. Distortion is felt to dirty up the original, as if questioning it or exposing faults in the perfect logic of the material's previous order. Besides, the distortion caused by overdriving an amplifier is also accompanied by signal compression, which translates aurally as sustain: once struck, a note can be held indefinitely instead of fading quickly. As explained by Robert Walser, "since sustaining anything requires effort, the distorted guitar sound signals power, not only through its distorted timbre but also through this temporal display of unflagging capacity for emission" (42). Consequently Hendrix's interpretation of the anthem sounds like an aural challenge to the anthem's authority and a forceful attack on its previous meaning – it is the closest musical equivalent to a political act. Not surprisingly, Sheila Whiteley describes Hendrix's sound effects as "aural attacks" on the musical structure of the anthem, which result in the undercutting of the very connotations of heroism and patriotism it carries (Whiteley 26).

Before we delve further into the political dimension of Hendrix's performance, I need to return to how genre frames the interpretation of sounds. What Walser can say with such authority on the "power" subtext of distortion in rock and heavy metal

ou larsen, bruit blanc ou rose des guitares saturées jouant à plein volume, au-delà de tout socle mélodique, harmonique ou même rythmique, effets que les formes les plus violentes de rock utilisent abondamment. Avec le bruit, le régulé, l'ordonné et le construit de la musique s'altèrent en aléatoire, en incontrôlé, et déconstruit. Le processus de métaphorisation a parfaitement fonctionné : s'affranchir des contraintes acoustiques comme de l'ordre musical est devenu un geste d'émancipation. On a entendu dans le larsen un cri d'indépendance."

9 Distortion can be defined as the "generat[ion] of an overflow of harmonic resonances in addition to the main frequency of the note being played," most often by overloading an amplification system (Waksman 138).

10 The distortion was so severe in Hendrix's first record, *Are You Experienced?* that the record presser returned the masters as defective (Millard 160).

is questionable when the effect appears in classical music. Judging from the evidence, it seems hard to defend the idea that notes alone can conjure up power and dissent – an argument that Eric F. Clarke developed precisely on the basis of his analysis of Hendrix's performance. Although he admits that "there is undoubtedly more than one way to hear these sounds" (Clarke 51), his study tries to establish links between listeners' interpretations of the performance and the musical material itself to "show that the impact of the performance can be traced to properties that are specified in the sounds themselves." This has him walking a very thin line between refined exegesis and self-fulfilling prophecy. While his is a noble quest to reveal the semantic dimension of sounds and the workings of musical meaning, I remain convinced that context overrides musical semantics. Therefore, my main concern here is to analyze the relation not between sounds and meaning, but between received meaning and transmitted meaning. The cover of a national anthem such as "The Star-Spangled Banner" provides a unique starting point to observe how representations are constructed – how they feed on one another as authors read and readers write, as musicians listen and listeners play, and as all of them have something to say on any stage of the process.

The significance of genre in musical meaning

While the non-controversiality of Ethel Ennis's version can probably be explained by chronology – as it followed both Feliciano's and Hendrix's – the mere context of her performance will have established *ipso facto* its acceptability. How could one question her patriotism, or even find fault in her syncopating a previously rigidly binary tune, if indeed she was invited to perform for Nixon's inaugural? In all three cases though, the target idioms (soul, jazz, and rock) did not initially qualify as fitting for a national anthem (customarily performed as a march, a subgenre of military music), especially since they belonged to the category of "popular music." Popular music being defined mostly as commercial music (songs are commodities, published and recorded for profit), entertainment and financial gain trump beauty and moral feelings as motives for creation. Hence the public could not take the artists' patriotic intentions for granted. Also, being commodities, and played in public places – even broadcast on national television for two of them – they were bound to trigger the general public's reaction.

Comparatively, on February 25, 1971, when Stockhausen used a heavily distorted musical quote from "The Star-Spangled Banner" in the world premiere of *Hymnen*, not an eyebrow was raised at the Lincoln Center. The genre of classical music – its avant-garde included – is understood as serious, respectful music, and if a composer inserts musical references into his work, the end product can only add to their

prestige and elevate them.[11] When compared to Ennis's and Feliciano's soft, almost coy interpretations, Stockhausen's piece sounds extremely violent;[12] and yet, the audience did not resent it. Their reaction might have been informed by the reading of Stockhausen's *Notes on the Program* before the performance. In the leaflet, he describes his "[combining] the American national anthem with the anthems of other nations [as] an effort to achieve something more than a primitive collage, to evoke a unity in which hate is abolished as a result of mediation among many hostile forces" (Stockhausen 1).[13] The textual explanation disperses any doubts as to the pacific intention of the work and its higher purpose. The distortion does not so much threaten the integrity of the anthem as it allows it to become fused into other national symbols in a meditation on nationality itself. Whatever violence surfaces in the process results from temporary tensions, to be dissolved into the eventual harmony.

There were no such guidelines for interpretation at Woodstock. Jimi Hendrix's performance was accompanied by no statement or text that might have clarified his intent. There was, however, a musical precedent for Hendrix, as well as a deafening political context that would lead journalists and authors to question the guitarist on his intentions in the following months.

Context

Most musical meaning is cultural. It is acquired through strings of associations between sound and ideas, then between sounds and similar sounds,[14] or it can be inferred from the specifics of a performance: where, when, to whom, and by whom a piece is played. In the context of the Vietnam War – a conflict which, incidentally, led to many instances of flag burning – Hendrix's version, the distortion and the volume, were overwhelmingly interpreted as mimicking the sounds of war. The performance is remembered as "complete with shellbursts, shrieks, taps, manic explosions of sound" (McGreggor), "with screams and wails and machine-gun bursts and diving, exploding bombs" (Rockwell 1974), or, in a more florid fashion:

11 It must be said that Igor Stravinsky's use of an unconventional major seventh chord in the first of his arrangements of "The Star-Spangled Banner" caused a scandal in Boston in 1944, as mentioned earlier ("Stravinsky Liable to Fine"). But Stravinsky already had a reputation as an iconoclast, being the author of the *Rite of Spring*, which had caused a riot when it premiered in Paris in 1913 and this precedent might have had an impact on how his subsequent performance of the anthem was received.

12 Stockhausen himself reported a short exchange with a little Mexican girl, who had asked him about the passage, "Do you think we have to go through this degree of destruction before there is peace?" The composer's positive answer leaves no doubt as to his own perception of the piece (Cott 23).

13 The American national anthem appears in the third of four movements called "regions," along with the Russian and Spanish anthems.

14 For example, because of their use in horror movies and thrillers, we all understand strident violins and augmented fourths, also called *diabolus in musica*, as meaning danger.

> The bombs burst, the rockets flash. The […] bayonet gorges; the cities flame; the armies crust; hollowed men stumble from starvation; children betray their parents, betray their brothers; crowds crush each other, gasp for breath; and always, always the song drones on, through the laaand of the freeee, and the hooooome of the braaave!—and then crash the song is over the power failure has come America it was falling down all around you. (Hicks 210)

This reading is supported by an examination of the webs of musical-semantic associations that Hendrix himself had spun at the end of the 1960s, especially on two instances. Exhibit A is 'Machine Gun,' a song composed at the same period (Prown *et al.* 50). As in a piece of program music, the title allows the listener to make semantic connections between sounds and meaning. The distortion, heard through the filter of the title, becomes another signifier for the sounds of war, and sets a precedent for the interpretation of similar sounds in Hendrix's performances. Then there was his Los Angeles Forum performance of the anthem of April 1969, three months before Woodstock, which he introduced with the words, "Here's a song we were all brainwashed with" (Waksman 171). At the end of the second couplet, the audience could hear him say "bullshit," and later, as he sang the phrase "and the rockets' red glare," he simulated the noise of bombs being dropped with the whammy bar. Although the Woodstock performance is free of all comments on the song, it is laden with the symbolism of those previous interpretations, which is why it feels so much like a *détournement*.

Defined in the 1950s by Guy Debord's Letterist International as the flipping of an original so as to have it convey the reverse of the original intent (Debord & Wolman), *détournement* seems the right word to characterize Hendrix's juxtaposition of a patriotic symbol with musical elements that to his audience had become associated with an underlying criticism of patriotism. In this sense, Hendrix's interpretation of the anthem at Woodstock is comparable to what happened at the 1968 Olympics, when African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists at a medal ceremony while "The Star-Spangled Banner" played. Just like the raised fists, pointing out the United States' failure at keeping the promises of the Declaration of Independence and the 14th Amendment – which the anthem somehow musically recalled – the superposition of notes used to celebrate America with the sounds of war, played in front of an audience that was overwhelmingly antiwar, turned the national symbol against itself, spelling out its failure to hold up to its promise – as if forcing it to self-destruct.

Such refinement in the handling of a symbolic system can appear far-fetched, yet the late 1960s was the right time to read sophisticated meanings into guitar sounds, as a new-born generation of rock critics strove to improve rock's intellectual and political credentials and insisted that there was more to rock than just music.

Whatever Hendrix really meant by his use of distortion, his sounds were bound to become more than wails in rock magazines, as well as to the youth that read them. The performance itself was invested with meaning by supporters of the idea that music could have political import, and subsequent interpretations of Hendrix's version of the anthem have contributed to making it an argument in the "music as language" or "music as speech" debate.

Distorting distortion

At the Experience Music Project Museum in Seattle – the guitarist's hometown – Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" is presented as "a wordless tone poem that still speaks louder than a dozen protest songs" (Reising 2001, 502). Vernon Reid, the guitarist of Living Colour, and one of the musicians to participate in the Experience Hendrix tribute tour, concurs, explaining that, "When you hear 'Machine Gun' or "The Star-Spangled Banner," there is much more said in those tunes than if Hendrix was a speechifying dude" (DeCurtis).

While it is clear that what Hendrix says through music – a non-referential art – cannot be understood as a straightforward statement and is therefore not likely to be force-fed to the listener, it is questionable whether it can be considered as a subtle political statement. The most quoted argument in the debate on music's political impact is that, however clear the message, music ends up preaching to the choir, since politically committed artists already belong to genres that are politically defined (as liberal, conservative, or even apolitical). Consequently, the audience already agrees with the artists' political message and music cannot be a political weapon. Whatever political power music might have can only be tested against outsiders' reactions to it. And it turns out that not all witnesses and authors understood Hendrix's solo as a criticism of the war.

In the *New York Times* of August 24, 1969, Patrick Lydon saw Hendrix's performance of the anthem as a sign that the festival had ended on a feeling of reconciliation. Far from understanding the distortion as a political statement, he writes, "What began as a symbolic protest against American society ended as a joyful confirmation that good things can happen here, that Army men can raise a 'V' sign, that country people can welcome city hippies" (Lydon). While this reading might appear as widely misinformed, ignoring the semantic history of Hendrix's use of distortion, it is actually closer to Hendrix's own explanation of his artistic intent than most authors' interpretations.

Hendrix commented on the Woodstock performance at least twice in the media, and both times he stated his intentions in very vague terms, to say the least. Two weeks after the event, when asked about his intentions on the Dick Cavett's television

show, he talked about the anthem as an ingrained melody that had come to him naturally, and had become the support of his present emotions as if by default:

> I don't know, man. All I did was play it. I'm American, so I played it. I used to sing it in school. They made me sing it in school, so it was a flashback. […] I don't think it was unorthodox. I thought it was beautiful. (Ventre)

Later, in December 1969, as he was interviewed at the Black Press Conference in Harlem, he summed up his reasons to play the anthem as stemming from a feeling of communion that the current political situation could not stamp out:

> Oh [I played it] because we're all American [...]. When it was written then, it was written in a very, very beautiful, what they call, beautiful state, you know, it is nice and inspiring, your heart throbs and you say 'great I'm American!' But nowadays when we play it we don't play it to take away all the greatness that America's supposed to have. We play the way the air is in America today. The air is slightly static. ("Jimi Hendrix Press Conference in Harlem, 1969")

Many authors who have written analyses of the performance know the quote but mention the last sentence only, claiming that Hendrix's sounds were the musical transposition of the political and social climate in the country at the time. To focus on the one word "static" is to miss the superposition of meaning revealed in the previous lines. The explanation came after Hendrix told the journalist that, to him, Woodstock's most notable achievement was that it was a non-violent gathering of people from different walks of life that "spread harmony and communication" ("Jimi Hendrix Press Conference in Harlem, 1969"). From what Hendrix said, it is impossible to conclude that there was just one message he wanted to convey through his performance. The guitarist was playing a memory as much at least as he was citing the national anthem and evoking the sounds of Vietnam. To rock critic Greil Marcus, the performance was a celebration of the anthem as much as a criticism of it, a personal vision as much as an attempt to speak for the community:

> I've listened to the performance many times. It's so complex, with so many different layers of disgust and celebration and alienation and engagement. There's really no way to just characterize it as a protest against the war. It's certainly that. But he's also saying, "I'm a citizen of this country, too." (Ventre)

This is something that Hendrix could never have achieved through a speech. It is in this superposition of layer after layer of significance and denial thereof that the essence of rock's subversive power lies. It can be maintained that the music's capacity to say one thing and its diametrical opposite – to be at once authentic and for sale, political and cynical – is at the root of its political potential. That is essentially Claude Chastagner's position, and the reason why he compares rock to pop art:

> The pop artist claims superposition for its inherent power as a critical tool. The political statement no longer lies in the message's ambiguity or the impossibility to define the artist's stance. It is to be found in the fact that he or she asks us to simultaneously hear their acceptance of commercialism as well as their questioning of it, and the pleasure they take in the consumer society as well as their criticism of it. (Chastagner 120)[15]

The most subversive effect of Hendrix's version of the national anthem might have been to turn a univocal statement into a polyphony of voices, an act of patriotism and reverence into at once a question mark, an exclamation mark and suspension points, and thus to have used distortion as a way to reach a musical *unheimlich* which has kept us guessing ever since.

Conclusion

After so much pondering about music's political import, it seems to me that one should ask the question of music's *musical* import in cultural studies analyses. When reading interpretations of Hendrix's solo, it is very clear that, in the end, those interpretations insist on Hendrix's political engagement to establish his credits as a serious musician. But very few works mention his musical credentials and possible musical connections that could explain his interest in the anthem. Without invalidating the present analysis, it must be stressed that one of the main reasons why Hendrix might have drawn from "The Star-Spangled Banner" in the first place – besides his childhood memories – might have been his familiarity with the musical avant-garde. It is more than likely that Hendrix knew of the Sunset Strip electronic tape music scene that began experimenting with the anthem in late 1965 (Perry 39). Besides exposing conservative fears that art could jeopardize a country's dignity, new

15 "L'artiste pop revendique la superposition en tant que telle, comme force d'action critique. Ce n'est plus l'ambiguïté du message, l'impossibilité de définir sa position qui est un geste politique, c'est le fait qu'il nous demande d'entendre simultanément l'acceptation du marché comme sa remise en question, la jouissance de la société de consommation comme sa critique."

interpretations of national anthems reveal audiences' hopes that artists will live up to their political expectations and that being authentic requires more than musicianship and talent.

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